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EUropanisation of the Balkans: a near future or ‘mission impossible’

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-Abstract-

This paper addresses the problems of the current process of and prospects for further post-communist ‘Europeanisation’ (primarily understood as a process of incorporation of the core norms and principles upon which the western EUropean political and socio-economic structures function) of the Balkan states. While there is a wide academic and political consensus that Europeanisation of the post-communist countries from East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics has been more or less successfully accomplished primarily thanks to the process of EU enlargement, the achieved level and prospects for further Europeanisation of the post-communist Balkans, and particularly Western-Balkan states remain a highly debatable issue. On the one hand, a large part of mainstream literature and most EU leaders and officials argue that this group of countries simply (and differently from their counterparts in ECE and the Baltics) cannot be (fully) Europeanised due to the structural disadvantages inherited throughout their long history of socio-economic and cultural backwardness. A continuously low level of consolidation of democratic institutions, particularly reflected through persistently high corruption and problems with respect for the rule of law in all the Balkan states, including Bulgaria and Romania which have now been EU members for more than a decade, are often highlighted as proof of the inability of these countries to adopt European standards and norms, even if they are subjected to the (forced) adoption of these through the EU accession process. On the other hand, some authors and pro-EUropean political elite in the Balkan states claim that these could quickly catch up with their ‘more Europeanised’ post-communist counterparts if the EU starts treating them in a similar way and providing them a similar level of assistance for post-communist reform as it did to the latter throughout their accession in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The region of South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans is comprised of ten relatively small countries all of which - except for Greece - fell under communist rule after the Second World War. Following the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and the opening of the enlargement process of the European Union in this region, only three post-communist states from the Balkans – Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia – were able to accompany Greece in acceding to the EU while all the others are still waiting to be ‘further (satisfactorily) EUropeanised’ and meet the EU’s accession conditions. While EU officials and a number of scholars (e.g. Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig, 2010; Huntington, 1993 and 1996; Janos, 2000; Seroka, 2008) argue that the main cause of the ‘Europeanisation delay’ of the Western Balkans

lies primarily in the inability of the states' socio-political structures to adopt core EU norms and values - particularly those related to the functioning of institutions of democracy and respect of the rule of law – the reality appears to be less straight forward. A closer look at the empirical facts reveals that the agent driven actions from both sides - the EU and the political leadership of leading member states on the one side, and the political elites of the Western Balkan states on the other – have played a much stronger role in the (non) Europeanisation of the latter group of states, than have structural factors.

While Balkan countries were socio-economically less developed than the countries of East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics, political developments and conditions of multi-party authoritarianism in all these countries (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) were very similar before they fell under communist rule after the Second World War (Crampton, 1997; Rotshield, 1974; Petrovic, 2013). Forty years of communist institutional and ideological rebuilding have further equalised political and socio-economic conditions throughout the communist world. If there was an impact of past legacies on political and socio-economic developments and the different pace of Europeanisation after the collapse of communism, it was primarily related to the existence of differences in the character and strength of communist rule in particular groups of communist states and the impact that these differences have had on the formation (or non-formation) of pro-reformist and pro-EU political elites. As defined and argued by this author in his 2013 monograph (Petrovic, 2013), the key role in the creation of important anti-communist national(ist) and/or liberal democratic political alternatives in the ECE communist states played weaknesses in rule of domestic communist elites, combined with a history of violent Soviet (or Soviet-driven) suppression of major protests and/or incentives for change or reform (Ekiert, 1996 and 2003) and the existence of strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiment in the Baltic states, Poland and Hungary (but not in Czechoslovakia). The virtual non-existence of such political alternatives and, consequently, their pro-reformist post-communist successors in four Balkan communist states¹ was primarily the result of the firm rule of domestic communist leaders who were able (in contrast to their counterparts in ECE) to secure some legitimacy for their rule. Some specific socio-economic structures established in these states throughout the period of communist rule, particularly those related to extensive industrialization and to (the related) significant increase in people's living standards (Table 1.1.), were only of secondary importance in this regard. It was a corrective factor which helped the Balkan communists to (partially) legitimise their dictatorial rule (Petrovic, 2013, chapter 3). Hence, the slow progress of all the Balkan states in post-communist reform and Europeanisation (i.e adoption of the core EU values and norms – see Section 1) during the 1990s, was a direct result of the lack of liberal-democratic political forces and the establishment of the political system of so-called illiberal democracy² in these states after the collapse of communist rule. However, if the Balkan peoples and their political leaders (most of whom were the members of the former communist *nomenklatura*) bear unto themselves the largest share of responsibility for the non-reformist pathways of their countries and consequently the establishment of much weaker links with the EU during the 1990s, they can hardly be (solely) blamed for the continuation of the slow pace of Europeanisation of their countries after the early 2000s, when all the Balkan states had elected pro-reformist and pro-EU governments. The latter circumstance is particularly relevant when speaking of the causes of slow

¹ Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. After the violent dissolution of communist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and separation of Montenegro and Kosovo from Serbia in 2006 and 2008 respectively, the present 'country account' of post-Yugoslav states in addition to these three also includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia.

² which pretended rather than introduced necessary political democratisation and economic transformation/marketisation (Petrovic, 2013; Zakaria, 1997)

Europeanisation of the Western Balkan states as will be discussed and explained in the following section. The second, final section of the paper critically addresses the prospects for the further Europeanisation of these states through the prism of the tightened accession conditions for the new candidates after 2006.

1. Who is to blame: internal disadvantages and weaknesses or the lack of external assistance?

Although it is generally used in a much broader sense and related to the transfer of political, socio-economic and cultural values, norms and attitudes developed in (predominantly Western) European countries and societies to non-European countries (Flockhart, 2010; Featherstone, 2003), the meaning of the term ‘Europeanisation’ in the modern political science literature dominantly corresponds to the process of European integration, and is in fact EU-centric (Flockhart, 2010, p. 789). It is primarily used to define the process of transformation of norms, procedures and regulations which exist at the EU level to the political, legal and social structures of the member states (Radealli, 2003) or to the countries which wish to become EU members (Grabbe, 2003 and 2006). For clarity purposes the term will be used in this paper as given in its title- ‘Europeanisation’. It will be used in the context of the ability of candidate countries for EU membership to meet the EU’s accession conditions as well as to comply with and adopt the core EU values and norms (Manners, 2002), which are incorporated in the accession conditions. Among these, particular attention will be paid to those parts of these conditions (i.e. values and norms) for which the measurement tools have been developed and extensively utilised by undisputed international centres and organisations. The Freedom House’s democracy score, Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (TICPI) and indicators of economic transition from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) indicators of economic transition (i.e. transformation from the communist command type to a market economy) will be the focus of this assessment.³

As discussed in the introduction, slow progress in the post-communist transition and Europeanisation of all the Balkan countries in the years following the collapse of communist rule was the direct consequence of the political conditions in which regime change occurred in these countries. Political elites in ECE and the Baltic states, mainly recruited from the former anti-communist (and pro-Western) liberal democratic opposition, rushed to pull their countries out of the deep economic and social crisis of the early 1990s (Table 1) by anchoring their post-communist reforms and economic transformation to the establishment of closer ties and (after 1993) the process of accession to the EU. However, these illiberal political leaders were not genuinely interested in substantial reforms and even less so in achieving EU conditional

³ Freedom House’s Nations in transit’s ‘democracy score: 1 being the highest: full democracy; 7 being the lowest: complete dictatorship).

EBRD economic transition indicators: 4.33 = standards of advanced industrial [market] economies; 1 = standards of a centrally planned economy.

Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (TICPI) gives information about the corruption level in each country of the world for that calendar year. Since 2012 the TICPI has ranged from 100 (very clean) to 0 (highly corrupt), while in the period until 2011 it ranged from 10 (very clean) to 1 (highly corrupt). For simplicity’s sake, it has been converted to a 100-to-0 scale for all years shown in the table.

assistance for reforms. Moreover, the successor states of former Yugoslavia sank into wars and ethnic conflicts. Under such conditions one certainly could not have expected the Balkan post-communist states to be able to meet any of the basic accession conditions defined at the European Council meeting in June 1993: “[s]tability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy...”(European Council, 1993, 7.A. iii). However, as soon as governmental power was taken by ‘real reformers’ and pro-European political actors in Romania and Bulgaria in 1996 and 1997 respectively, relations between these two and the EU improved, and they opened accession negotiations in February 2000, together with three ‘late reformers’ from ECE and the Baltics: Slovakia, Latvia and Lithuania. Soon after, significant acceleration in the post-communist political and economic transition of these two countries⁴ was rewarded by membership of the EU, on 1 January 2007 (only two and a half years after the ECE and the Baltic states had joined on 1 May 2004).

Table 1. Gross Domestic Product per capita in Central, South and South-Eastern Europe and some West European countries (in 1990 Geary-Khamis US dollars)

	1937	1989
Netherlands	5,433	16 695
France	4,487	17,730
Germany	4,685	16,558
Austria	3,156	16,369
Italy	3,319	15,969
Greece	- 2,769	10,086
Portugal	1,757	10,372
Spain	1,808	11,582
Czechoslovakia	2,882	8,768
Hungary	2,543	6,903
Poland	1,915	5,684
Romania	1,130	3,941
Bulgaria	1,567	6,216
Yugoslavia	1,273	6,250
Albania	926 ¹	2,477

Source: Maddison, 2003.

⁴ However, the level of corruption in them remained very high throughout a long period after their accession (Table 2).

On the other hand, Albania and the ever-increasing number of successor states of former Yugoslavia (excluding Slovenia) had to wait longer to receive the EU's invitation for accession and, with it, strong support and assistance for their post-communist political and economic transformation.⁵ This was accompanied by new and specially designed EU policy incentives for this group of post-communist states, which have been labelled the "Western Balkans". The incentive for accession was launched after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in the mid-1990s, and its main objective was to restore peace and stability in the region together with boosting post-communist reforms. It was initially named the 'coherent strategy' and quickly evolved into the 'Stabilisation and Association Process' (SAP).⁶ The SAP gained importance after the death of the Croatian authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of his Serbian counterpart Milošević in October the following year, when the two largest Western Balkan states finally obtained pro-reformist and pro-European governments. The prospects for full Europeanisation of the Balkans appeared to be highly promising by the adoption of the 'Thessaloniki Agenda' in June 2003,⁷ which clearly stated:

The Western Balkans and support for preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU. The Balkans will be an integral part of a united Europe (paragraph, 2)

These political changes in the Western Balkan states and their improved relations and intensified cooperation with the EU were quickly effectuated through a very rapid improvement of democratic conditions, and the strong economic transformation of these states throughout the first half of the 2010s (Table 2).

However, enlargement enthusiasm and hopes for a relatively quick Europeanisation of the Western Balkan states did not last long. Even before its mega-enlargement was completed with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the EU decided to "renew [the] consensus on enlargement" (European Council, 2006, point 4). Adopted under the pressure of emerging *enlargement fatigue* and fears for the EU's "absorption/enlargement capacity" (Phinnemore 2006; Petrovic 2009; Petrovic-Smith, 2013), the "renew consensus on enlargement" did not have any other purpose but to tighten accession conditions for new applicants. From that moment on, the basic objective of EU 'enlargement policy' towards the Western Balkan states

⁵ The establishment of closer ties with the EU and, especially, the opening of the accession negotiation process, is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1 of the above mentioned monograph (Petrovic, 2013) where it is defined as the most important form of external assistance for the successful post-communist economic and socio-political transition of a former communist state (see also Lavigne, Petrovic, 2017)

⁶ For more details on this see EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 1997 and EU General Affairs Council, 1999.

⁷ *The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration*, adopted by the conclusions of the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council of 16 June 2003 and endorsed in the conclusions (Art. 41) of the European Thessaloniki Council of 19-20 June 2003.

Table 2. Indicators of post-communist democratisation and marketization

	Democracy score*				TICPI***				Economic Transition**		
	1999	2006	2012	2017	1999	2006	2012	2017	1999	2006	2014
<i>Hungary</i>	1.88	2.14	2.89	3.54	52	52	51	45	3.7	3.9	3.9
<i>Poland</i>	1.58	2.36	2.18	2.57	42	37	58	60	3.5	3.7	4.1
<i>Slovakia</i>	2.71	2.14	2.57	2.61	37	47	46	50	3.3	3.7	4.0
<i>Latvia</i>	2.29	2.07	2.07	2.04	34	47	49	58	3.1	3.6	3.9
<i>Lithuania</i>	2.29	2.29	2.32	2.32	38	48	54	59	3.1	3.7	3.9
<i>Romania</i>	3.54	3.29	3.50	3.39	33	31	44	48	2.8	3.3	3.7
<i>Bulgaria</i>	3.58	2.89	3.18	3.36	33	40	41	43	2.8	3.5	3.7
<i>Croatia</i>	4.46	3.75	3.61	3.71	27	34	46	49	3.0	3.5	3.8
Maced FYR	3.83	3.82	3.93	4.43	33	27	43	35	2.7	3.1	3.6
Albania	4.75	3.82	4.25	4.14	23	26	33	38	2.6	2.9	3.5
Bosnia-Hrz	5.42	4.04	4.39	4.54	N/A	29	42	38	2.0	2.6	3.1
Montenegro	5.50	3.93	3.82	3.89	N/A	N/A	41	46	1.6	2.5	3.3
Serbia	5.50	3.68	3.64	3.82	24	27	39	41	1.4	2.7	3.2

Sources: FH Nations in Transit, Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index, EBRD Transition Report (various years)

was not to further speed up the accession of these states, but rather to try to avoid “mistakes” from the previous enlargement rounds, particularly those related to the “premature” accession of Romania and Bulgaria (Vachudova, 2014; Grabbe, 2014).

Instead of receiving more assistance for completing remaining necessary reforms, the Western Balkan states have been given not only the tightened Copenhagen assessment conditions (European Commission, 2006; European Council, 2006), and (rightfully deserved) SAP conditions regarding post-war reconciliation and peace-building in the region (from which countries from the 2004/07 enlargement round were spared), but also the “Copenhagen plus - plus -plus conditions” (Petrovic, 2017 and Petrovic, Smith, 2013) in the form of requests for compliance with the EU’s incentives for solving intraregional disputes related to the contested statehood status of almost all the Western Balkan states.⁸ Moreover, while the EU’s request for the fulfilment of the Copenhagen accession conditions has, as discussed above, been of great assistance to post-communist states, through providing them with advice and guidelines for

⁸ Of all the Western Balkan states only Croatia, Montenegro and Albania were spared of this ‘fourth layer’ of accession conditions that related to the disputed statehood status of B-H, Kosovo (and Serbia) and Macedonia.

building democratic institutions and a market economy, the EU's request for compliance with its incentives for solving intraregional statehood disputes was often a 'pure burden' on the Western Balkan states, which could not have in any way assisted, but only postponed, their Europeanization. As argued in Petrovic 2013, chapter 5 (see also Boerzel & Grimm, 2018; Bieber, 2011; Noutcheva 2009 and 2012 and Petrovic, 2017) most of these incentives, especially those regarding the centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the resolution of the Greek-Macedonian dispute regarding the 'naming issue' were inappropriately formulated (or not formulated at all, with regards to the Greek-Macedonian dispute), with very little respect for the countries' specifics and realistic chances of meeting them.

Despite some successes in initiating and managing the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and maintaining peace and stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo (foremost by the use of EU civil and military/police missions) these incentives did not consider 'the strategic behaviour of domestic actors and constraints they face...[and therefore] neglect[ed] the rational interests of domestic actors and the dynamics of two-level game negotiations' (Börzel, 2018: 124). As if all this was not enough, after the 'enlargement enthusiasm' in the core EU member states sunk further with the emergence of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008/09, with the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2010, and when it became certain that Croatia would join in 2013; the EU decided to further tighten the accession process for the new candidates, i.e. for the Western Balkan states.⁹ This time the accession conditions were not officially changed, but 'the Commission [decided to] put particular emphasis on the three pillars of 'the rule of law, economic governance and public administration reform' (European Commission, 2014, p.1). In other words, it was decided that the accession negotiations chapters which cover these three pillars should be opened among the first, and thoroughly negotiated to ensure "a stronger focus on addressing fundamental reforms [in the candidate countries] early in the enlargement process" (ibid, 1). It was expected that the candidate countries would in this way be better prepared for accession (than was the case in the previous enlargement rounds) and therewith also ensure that 'enlargement is not at the expense of the effectiveness of the Union' (ibid, 1).

In this way the WB states were, unlike the ECE and the Baltic post-communist states and even their neighbours Bulgaria and Romania, exposed to an ever-increasing number of

⁹ By that time Turkey's accession had effectively fallen from the enlargement agenda due to both increased opposition to it in the leading EU member states and internal developments in Turkey, particularly Erdogan's increased authoritarianism and his lack of desire to comply with EU demands and meet accession conditions.

conditions that they needed to meet to be Europeanised. While such an EU approach was partially grounded on a genuine need to assure the successful building of state and government institutions in the largely dysfunctional Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (and to some extent also in Albania which suffered from an enormously high level of corruption and weak governance/state institutions) in the case of Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, which by 2006 were more or less on the same level of consolidating their democratic institutions with that of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, at the time when they opened accession negotiations (Table 2, see also Petrovic and Smith, 2013) it can be considered as (at least) unnecessary and/or as a ‘tool’ for the postponement of the accession of these states.

All in all, neither the tightened accession conditions of 2006 nor the ‘three pillar’ approach after 2012/2014 have contributed to significant improvements in democratisation in any of the Western Balkan states after 2006 (Table 2), but they definitely made further burdens to these states’ accession to the EU and their Europeanisation. In some cases, especially in Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina this tightened approach to accession had in fact serious counter effects as will be shown in the following section.

2. Can they be Europeanised?

Due to developments and reasons discussed in the latter part of the previous section, the process of accession and the attendant Europeanisation of the WB states more or less completely stalled during the first half of this decade (see Table 3). The only two exceptions were Montenegro and (since 2012 and particularly 2014) Serbia. The moderate progress in accession of these two, had however very little to do with their Europeanisation through the adoption of the EU’s norms and values incorporated in the (tightened) Copenhagen accession conditions, particularly not those related to the democracy standards and the rule of law (the first and the most important pillar in the post-2012 EU ‘three pillars approach’). In accordance to its general approach to relations with neighbouring countries that the EU adopted after the emergence of enlargement fatigue in the mid-2010s and strengthened during the multiple crises that it faced after 2009/2010, the EU has almost exclusively insisted on compliance with its stability and security priorities in its relations with the Western Balkan candidates (Pomorska and Noutcheva, 2017). As these goals were mainly incorporated in the above discussed ill prepared and often controversial EU incentives, such an approach could only have produced mixed, if not controversial outcomes. This explains why Montenegro, the country with a problematic democratic record, became the regional frontrunner in the accession process.

Although Serbia and Macedonia have reached a similar (and in some respects higher) level of Europeanisation than Montenegro (measured by the indicators shown in Table 2) and have

not been led by ‘strong men’, uninterruptedly for nearly three decades,¹⁰ the progress in EU accession of these two countries was significantly slower than in the case of Montenegro. The only reason for this was the EU’s assessment of their (mainly unsatisfactory) record in contributing to the [re]solution of the statehood disputes in the region. As discussed in greater detail in Petrovic 2017, the cornerstone in Serbia’s accession had become its “commitment and achieved further progress... in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue” (EU General Affairs Council, 2012: 1), whereas Macedonia had to solve its dispute with Greece about its very name. Hence, while Montenegro, which did not have to comply with additional political demands related to regional stability was invited (despite its internal political tensions) to open the first chapters of its accession negotiations ‘only’ three and a half years after it had submitted its application for membership, Serbia waited for it full five years (plus one additional year to open the first chapters). Macedonia, which until very recently was not able to make any progress in talks with Greece¹¹ is still waiting to open accession negotiations (Table 3).

Table 3. Progress in EU Accession

	Signed Association/SA agreement	Entered into force	Membership application	Accession Negotiations opened	Accession Negotiations closed
Poland	16.12.1991	1.2.1994	1.4. 1994	31.3.1998	12.12.2002
Hungary	16.12.1991	1.2.1994	8.4.1994	31.3.1998	12.12.2002
Slovakia*	4.10.1993	1.2.1995	27.6.1995	15.2.2000	12.12.2002
Latvia	12. 6.1995	1.2.1998	27.10.1995	15.2.2000	12.12.2002
Lithuania	12. 6.1995	1.2.1998	8.12.1995	15.2.2000	12.12.2002
Bulgaria	8. 03.1993	1.02.1995	14.12.1995	15.2.2000	16.12.2004
Romania	1. 02.1993	1.02.1995	22.06.1995	15.2.2000	16.12.2004
Albania	12.06.2006	1.04.2009	28.04.2009	No	No
Bosnia-Herzeg.	16.06.2008	1.06.2015	15.02.2016	No	No
Croatia	9.04. 2001	1.02.2005	20.02.2003	5.10.2005	30.06.2012
Macedonia FYR	9.04.2001	1.04.2004	22.03.2004	No	No
Montenegro	15.10.2007	1.05.2010	15.12.2008	16.06.2012	No
Serbia	29.04.2008	1.09.2013	22.12.2009	14.01.2014provs.**	No
Kosovo	27.10.2015	1/04/2016	No	No	No

* Czechoslovakia - 16.12.1991

** The first chapters (35 and 32) were opened on 14 December 2015.

Source: European Commission Archive on Past Enlargements and other documents

This approach by the EU to the Western Balkan states’ accession, which prioritised regional and national political stability (as it was understood and defined in the respective EU

¹⁰Montenegro is the only post-communist state in Europe which has never experienced an electoral change of ruling party or leader. The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its leader, Milo Djukanovic have been in power throughout the whole period of post-communist (and even the last few years of communist) history of the country. Djukanović himself has served six terms as prime minister and two as president of the country during this period. He is current President of the country, elected in the election held on 18 May 2018 (see e.g. Hopkins, 2012; Tomovic, 2016 and Vachudova, 2014).

¹¹ The latest news says that the prime ministers of the two countries were finally able to reach the compromise (i.e. find the mutually acceptable name for the southeast [most south?] republic of former Yugoslavia) in early June. However, the opposition to the adopted name (‘North Makedonija’) is very strong in both countries and the results of the national referenda on the issue are not so certain (source)

policy incentives), rather than meeting democracy standards and progressing with other necessary socio-economic reforms, has not only further slowed down the accession (and therefore Europeanisation) of these states, but it also initiated certain backslide effects on the socio-political stability of these states. These were especially strong in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While Serbia and Kosovo were able to make some progress (not without the considerable assistance of the European Commission and High Representative Mogherini— see European Union, 2018) in the ‘Belgrade- Pristina dialogue’ and for it were awarded with some headway in the accession process, the accession of both Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina completely stalled after the late 2000s (Table 3).

The EU’s inaction in ‘the naming issue’ and its waiting for the Macedonian and Greek political leaderships to solve it more or less by themselves (which they were unable to do for almost three decades)¹² and the consequent continuous postponement of the opening accession negotiations, have started to significantly cool off enlargement expectations (let alone enthusiasm) in Macedonia. This has further contributed to an increase of political animosities and social unrest that in 2015 and 2016 brought the country to the brink of civil war (see Bechev, 2015, Petrovic, 2017). Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H), the EU in the late 2000s defined the necessity of the country’s constitutional change towards greater centralisation and strengthening of the role of federal institutions as the *sine qua non* for its progress in the SA and accession process. However, this ‘necessity’ was strongly opposed by the Bosnian Serb population (and to a large extent by the Bosnian Croats as well) and had zero chance of being consensually adopted at the national level (as required by the country’s constitution – see e.g. Balkaninside, 2014 and InSerbia.info.,2015). As such it not only stopped the country’s progress in the SAP process, but became an additional source of ethnic animosities and political conflicts which resulted in destabilisation rather than consolidation of democratic institutions in the country as a whole.¹³ Hence, speaking in terms of Europeanisation, it could be said that the EU with the above policy of (non)incentives and political demands, obstructed rather than supported the Europeanisation of these two Western Balkan states during the first half of this decade.

By the mid-2010s, the EU itself began to be aware of the backsliding effects of its state-building and conflict resolution policies towards these two Western Balkan states. While the European Commission stated in its 2015 report on Macedonia (European Commission, 2015a) that ‘the last decade’s reforms are being undermined...’the EU council initiated in December

¹². Macedonia and Greece had agreed already in 1995, when they formalized bilateral relations to negotiate this problem under the auspices of the United Nations; however, these negotiations have been very occasional and informal and (until very recently) without any resolute political incentive which could have moved them forward.

¹³ Since the late 2000s the EU requirements have defined the necessity of the country’s constitutional change in the above direction as the *sine qua non* for its progress in the SAP process and towards EU accession (See e.g. European Commission, *Annual Progress Reports on Bosnia-Herzegovina* for all years in the period 2007-2015 available from the Commission’s website as well as Bieber, 2010, Noutcheva 2012 and Tzifakis 2012).

2014 (EU Foreign Affairs Council, 2014) a change in the EU's approach towards developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina that placed a focus on the solution of the "outstanding socio-economic challenges it faces" (European Commission 2015, p. 4), rather than on changes to its constitutional order. This resulted in the quick adoption of the so-called "Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015 – 2018" by all three levels of the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (including those of the two entities) in July 2015 (Delegation of the European Union..., 2015). The Reform Agenda initiated common reform actions which were supported by the leaderships of all three major Bosnian and Herzegovinian ethnic groups and led to the adoption of legislative changes for the organisation of the local elections in October 2016, alongside some progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime (European Commission, 2016, pp. 5-6). These positive steps in the implementation of the Agenda were relatively quickly rewarded with the EU's decision to allow the Bosnian and Herzegovinian leadership to formally submit its application for EU membership in February 2016 (Table 3). During 2015 and 2016 the EU and the Commission in particular were also busy trying to handle explosive developments in Macedonia (Bechev, 2015; Petrovic, 2017) which were brought back to 'normal' only after negotiations led by EU Commissioner Hahn brokered an agreement between the four Macedonian major parties on a 'tender truce' and the early elections in April 2016 (European Commission, 2015b). After using various sets of reasons and excuses, the semi authoritarian Gruevski government was able to postpone these elections to November 2016. The elections were eventually won by Gruevski's centre right VMRO party, but with a very slim majority which did not enable it to form the new government. After several months of negotiations there was formed the current coalition government led by Prime Minister Zaev (see e.g. Testorides, 2017) the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). As discussed earlier, 'less nationalist' and more open to compromise Zaev was able to finally solve the 'naming issue' in early June 2018 (Tzallas, 2018) and in that way pave the way for his country to open the accession negotiations with the EU (most likely) by the end of this year.

After it was briefly interrupted in 2016 and early 2017 by the initial shock of Brexit and the migrant crisis, the EU seems to have continued with its pro-active approach to the accession ambitions of the Western Balkan states, i.e. to their EUropeanisation through the accession process. The first encouraging signs came with the victory of pro-EU parties and candidates in the Dutch parliamentary and French presidential elections in April and May 2018, with optimism and expectations among the Western Balkan political elites raised after the European Commission President Junker's announcement in his 2017 State of the Union speech (European Commission, 2017) that the EU can expect to enlarge its membership by 2025. However, the European Commission's Western Balkan Enlargement Strategy issued in February 2018 (European Commission, 2018) and even some of Junker's own later 'clarifications' have considerably cooled this optimism and once more sent mixed signals to the Western Balkan candidates for EU membership. Although the basic message of the strategy and the later issued Commission's progress reports on the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for membership, should have remained 'in line' with Junker's optimistic announcement of 2025 as a year of possible new enlargement, the outlined 'circumstances'

under which this could happen can hardly be considered encouraging for the Western Balkan aspirants to EU membership. The clear specification of an additional accession condition for all the Western Balkan membership candidates - a requirement that they need to solve all their 'bilateral disputes...as a matter of urgency' (European Commission 2018, p. 7) - seems to be particularly demanding and challenging for the regional political elites. While Montenegro hopes to solve its only remaining (though nearly thirty-year-old) dispute with Croatia over the sea border relatively soon, the second regional frontrunner for EU membership, Serbia, and most of the remaining Western Balkan states have, as shown above, many more (and more serious) problems to resolve with their neighbours.

Only time will tell whether a relatively quick resolution of the 'naming issue' between Macedonia and Greece after the adoption of the February strategy is merely a historical coincidence, or a sign that this latest additional accession condition for the Western Balkan states will not be as tough as previously, and that the EU has finally decided to EUropean-ise this small part of its immediate neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The slower EUropeanisation of the Western Balkan states in comparison with their post-communist counterparts that joined the EU in the previous enlargement rounds is not caused by their inadequate structural capacity to adopt core EU values and norms. Rather, it is the result of decisions made by political elites in the Western Balkan states and in the EU, i.e. its leading Western member states. While all the Western Balkan states as well as Bulgaria and Romania were ruled by illiberal political leaders during the 1990s, who were not interested in the EUropeanisation of their countries, the reasons for the postponed EUropeanisation of these states in the 2010s should be primarily sought in the lack of genuine interest of political elites in core EU member states in EU enlargement into the Western Balkans. Instead of providing more technical and financial assistance for reform which could have enabled the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for accession to meet the accession conditions easier, the EU after 2006 tightened the Copenhagen conditions for them and started to subject their accession to the fulfilment of additional political conditions which have little to do with EU values and norms but much more with regional stability and security. While Montenegro and Albania (and earlier Croatia) were spared requirements to comply with the additional EU conditions related to intraregional and national disputes about statehood status, progress in the accession process of other candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans in recent years has almost exclusively been determined by the EU's assessments of their compliance with these conditions. These additional conditions (or EU incentives) were often inappropriately formulated, with very little respect for a country's specifics and realistic chances of meeting them. Hence, it could be said that the EU has since 2006 adopted an obstructive, rather than supportive, stance towards the Europeanisation of the Western Balkan states.

Time will tell whether recent indications of a change to the EU's approach towards accession of the Western Balkans are a sign of genuine interest in the faster Europeanisation of these states. Faster or slower, Europeanisation of the Western Balkans is a matter of political will and therefore definitely not 'mission impossible'.

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